

Bruce R. Watkins Drive



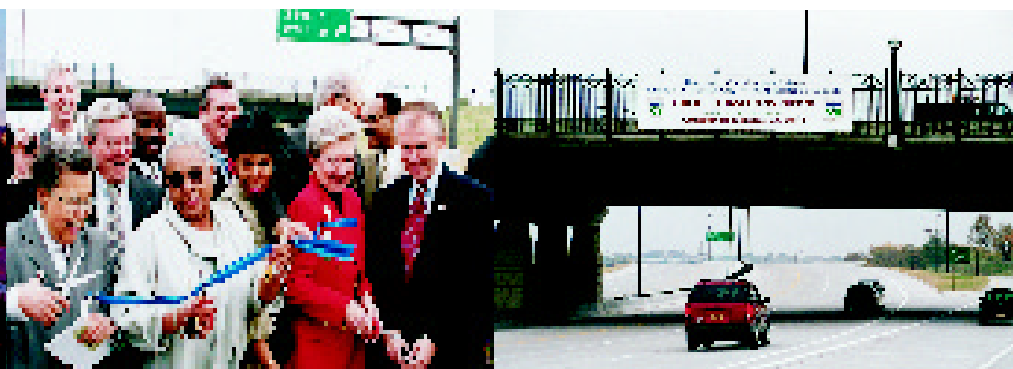
Kansas City's Vital Link

Steer straight through an urban landscape on the city's new north-south connection

By Dianna Lopez

Photography by Cathy Morrison

Consider a ribbon of pavement weaving its way more than 10 miles past stone-façade sound barriers and uniquely designed lamp posts ... continuing under more than 40 ornate bridges, most featuring painted ironwork, some with decorative glass insets, brick pillars or towering columns ... and, soon, trees, shrubbery, flowers and other eye-pleasing landscaping sprinkled throughout grassy knolls.



It was a celebration to remember: the opening of Kansas City's Bruce R. Watkins Drive on Monday, Oct. 22, 2001.

Hundreds of people – those who've worked on and lived alongside the project – turned out for the event. That's because Watkins Drive – an extension of Route 71 – has had a positive impact on the community and on those directly involved in taking it from an idea to reality.

The roadway also will benefit motorists traveling between the suburbs and other cities south of downtown, and the heart of Kansas City.

The Partnership

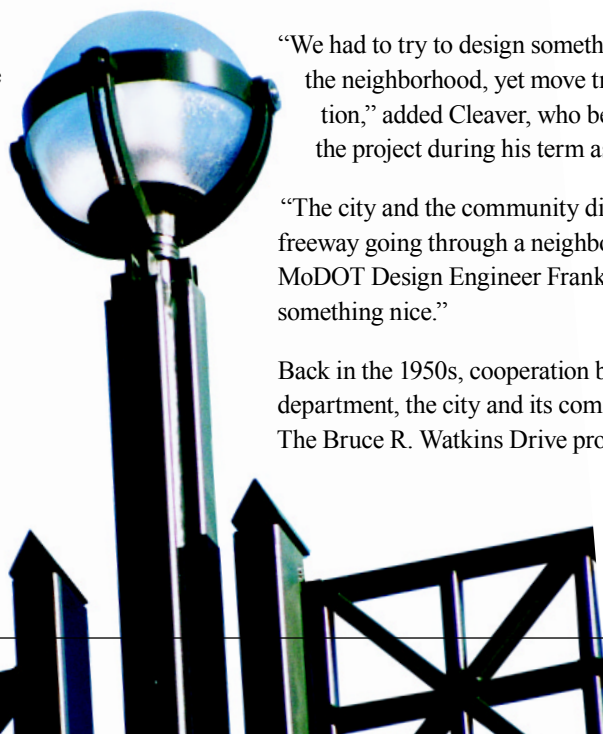
"I think you saw here, people coming together like they don't normally do in other cities around the country," former

Kansas City Mayor Emanuel Cleaver once said about Bruce R. Watkins Drive.

"We had to try to design something that would fit in with the neighborhood, yet move traffic swiftly to its destination," added Cleaver, who became highly involved in the project during his term as mayor in the 1990s.

"The city and the community didn't want an ugly, generic freeway going through a neighborhood," says former MoDOT Design Engineer Frank Green. "They wanted something nice."

Back in the 1950s, cooperation between the state highway department, the city and its communities was uncommon. The Bruce R. Watkins Drive project changed all that.



“I don’t think the city planners really had a plan back then,” says Kansas City business owner and Missouri Highways and Transportation Commissioner Ollie Gates.

He’s referring to 1951, when the City Planning Commission first considered a transportation link from downtown to its southern portion and included it in the city’s highway master plan.

“I think they were just looking to get from point A to point B,” Gates says. “They weren’t considering whether it would be an asset to the community.”

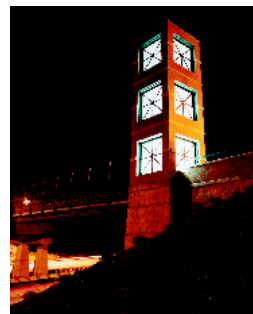
But many of those who have worked on the project say that’s exactly what Bruce R. Watkins Drive has become.

The Results

“It’s a direct link from southtown to downtown. It connects suburban to urban,” says Steve Porter, senior public affairs specialist for MoDOT’s Kansas City district.

MoDOT purchased Porter’s childhood home near 64th and Chestnut streets in spring 1970 to make way for the roadway project. Twenty-five years later that stretch of Watkins Drive was opened to travelers.

“A couple of years after that, many of our Chestnut neighbors gathered for a reunion,” Porter recalls. “We were all pleased with the results, especially the enhancements.”



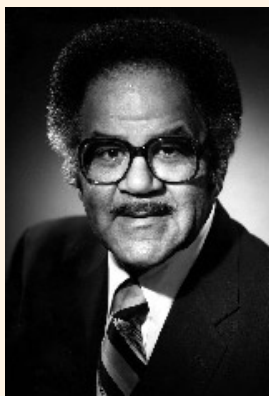
Watkins Drive runs 10.2 miles from near the Triangle in south Kansas City to Interstate 70 downtown. It carries 30,000-plus vehicles into and out of downtown

Kansas City each weekday, surpassing original projections.

The October celebration included opening the final stretch of the roadway – about two new miles of pavement, bridges and unique enhancements between Linwood Boulevard and I-70.



The Name



Bruce R. Watkins Drive was named after one of Kansas City’s pioneering black civic leaders. He’s described by some as having made innumerable contributions to the development of Kansas City and toward the advancement of civil rights for blacks.

Born in Parkville, Mo., in 1924, Watkins was the first black elected to Kansas City’s City Council, in 1963. He became the first black person to hold countywide office when he was elected Jackson County circuit clerk three years later.

In 1978, Watkins achieved another first as a mayoral candidate. That was his final achievement, before he died in 1980 from cancer.

“Bruce was a diplomat, a people person,” says longtime friend Gates. “Many saw Bruce as the man who began to excite the spirit of Kansas City in regard to the black community.”

That spirit and Watkins’ achievements endure with the dedication of Kansas City’s unique north-south roadway.